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An Old Syriac Reading of Acts 1:4 and More Light on Jesus' Last Meal before His Ascension

Much ado has been made concerning the "Last Supper" which, in fact, was not the last meal Jesus partook before His Ascension. This great event has overshadowed the last meal that the Master ate with His apostles some time shortly before His Ascension from the Mount of Olives, ten days before Pentecost. This article will bring forward for the first time the evidence of the Old Syriac version of Acts 1:4 and then further elucidate the significance of this final meal before the Ascension.

This event is recorded in Acts 1:4a by a problematic *kai sunalizomenos*. A note in *The Translators' New Testament* sums up the situation: "Translators will find a puzzling variety of translations in existing English versions. This is partly because there are variant readings in the Greek text"¹. The variants in the Greek, which Metzger considers to be "less perplexing than the lexical considerations concerning the meaning of the word"², are simply a symptom of a later misunderstanding. The major variant to be considered for *sunalizomenos* is *sunaulizomenos* which is attested by about thirty-five minuscule MSS and many patristic writers³. The word means "to spend the night with, to be with, to stay with".

This variant is easy to comprehend to be an explanatory emendation in light of the ambiguity of *sunalizomenos*, which can mean either of two things. With a long *a*, this word commonly meant "collect" or "assemble" in Classical and Hellenistic Greek. With a short *a*, this word literally meant "eat salt with one another", which was usually consumed during a meal, and thus it can be

1 *The Translators' New Testament* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1973) 459.

2 Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 1973) 278.

3 Ibid. F.F. Bruce in his *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1951) on 68 states: "Ephrem Syrus also understood it thus". This is not true if one examines Bruce's source for Ephrem, which he mentions on 5 n. 1, 42 n. 1 of the same book as Ephrem's commentary on Acts. For Acts 1:4, the citation is in the Armenian catena, but according to James H. Ropes, *The Text of Acts* being vol. 3 of *The Beginnings of Christianity*, ed. by F.J. Foakes, Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids, 1979) 385, n. 1, this section is from "Chrys. 7 D. E." However, even if this section were from Ephrem, it witnesses to neither *sunalizomenos* nor *sunaulizomenos*, being a rather vague allusion.

translated “eat”⁴. Metzger mentions that the second meaning is extremely rare and does not appear before the end of the second century A.D. However, he does mention that many of the early versions took *sunalizomenos* in the sense of “eat”⁵. Among these are the OL, the Vg, the Coptic, the Syriac Peshitta and Harklean versions, the Armenian, the Ethiopic and the Georgian. Professor Metzger and the U.B.S. Committee preferred the meaning of “collect” or “assemble” because of the predominant evidence of Greek literature. Though not all scholars would agree with this rendering of *sunalizomenos*, the position of the U.B.S. Committee most likely represents a majority opinion today. It must be mentioned, however, that the issue is not yet closed with the decision of the U.B.S. Committee. The logic and evidence of the Committee, though reasonable when viewed only from the Greek perspective, is still not conclusive.

Though the lack of evidence for *sunalizomenos* meaning “eat salt with one another” at the time of the writing of Acts is weighty, it is not absolutely conclusive due to the fragmentary nature of extant ancient literature. And, when viewed in the broader perspective of the evidence of the ancient versions, the choice of the meaning for *sunalizomenos* adopted by the U.B.S. Committee becomes doubtful. When the huge majority of the early versions speaks as with one mouth that this word has to do with the act of eating, one must listen. When the best of ancient scholarship so unitedly agrees on a point of Greek usage in a certain text, the evidence must be regarded very highly. Since there is no good reason to reject the evidence of the versions, “eat (salt with one another)” must be considered as the most likely explanation of the meaning of *sunalizomenos* as used here in Acts 1:4.

This is not all, to the above evidence, the author would like to add a new witness to the chorus of the above mentioned versions. This is the Old Syriac version, possibly the most venerable of all the ancient versions. The text used by Ephrem in hymn XXXVI in his hymns on virginity reads *’etmelah*⁶, “he was salted” or “ate”, literally rendering *sunalizomenos* with a short *a*. This reading is not unique in the Syriac realm, though. It is very similar to the *metmelah* of the Harklean version, which was literally translated from the Greek. The Peshitta reads *’ekal lahmā*, “he ate bread”. At first glance, since Ephrem and the Harklean version agree, one might think that Ephrem was influenced here by the Greek. This is virtually impossible since there has never been any evidence brought forth that Ephrem ever knew Greek.

4 Haenchen cites examples from *Clem. Rec.* 7.2 and *Clem. Hom.* 13.4 where the word denotes the evening meal which consisted of bread and salt. Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1971) 141, n. 3.

5 Metzger, 278.

6 Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers de Virginitate*, CSCO Scriptorum Syri 94 (Louvain, 1964) 132.

Thus, since Ephrem diverges from the text of the Peshitta, it is quite possible that here he was influenced by the now lost Old Syriac version of Acts. This is likely since Ephrem is one of the best witnesses to the Old Syriac version of Acts⁷. Unfortunately this verse was infrequently quoted among the early Syrian fathers and not at all by Aphrahat or in *Liber Graduum*⁸; so up to now, Ephrem is the only witness to this Old Syriac reading⁹. In light of the Syriac evidence, one can say that here, the Old Syriac followed the Greek more closely than the Peshitta and that the Syrians, from at least the second to the seventh centuries, understood *sunalizomenos* to mean “be salted together with” or “eat”.

All of this evidence from the early versions is as significant as it is unified. If one chooses to follow the united chorus of the ancient versions, a very interesting scenario presents itself, and the character of this event, set in its proper milieu, will help explain the later confusion among the Greek witnesses.

It is not the purpose of this article to detailedly enumerate the positions of the various scholars or discuss the syntactical problem associated with the interpretation of *sunalizomenos* with a long *a*¹⁰. From here on, this article will attempt to elucidate the significance of this solemn, final meal that Jesus had with the apostles. First of all, the fact that Luke used *sunalizomenos*, an uncommon word for “eat”, must be investigated. Since there are much more common words for “eat” in the Greek New Testament such as *phagō* and *esthiō* and their cognates, there must be a deliberate purpose for the choice of such an odd word. The reason must lie in the fact that this was no ordinary meal. Torrey, Black, Wilcox¹¹, and others have discussed the use of *sunalizomenos* and the possible influence of Syriac, Aramaic or Hebrew usage. Regardless of the fascinating linguistic arguments, it cannot be denied that the whole milieu is typically Jewish Palestinian. For that matter, the characters are Galileans. Therefore one would expect this record to be typically Semitic in flavor. There is no reason to believe that Acts 1:4 is set in a hellenistic situation. Two of the top leaders of this group are considered “unlearned and ignorant men” (Acts 4:13), certainly not a description of Galilean hellenists.

⁷ Ropes, *The Text of Acts*, cxlviii.

⁸ For a full listing of the variants see: Daniel L. McConaughy, *Research on the Early History of the Syriac Text of Acts Chapters One and Two*, unpublished dissertation (University of Chicago, 1985) 164. It is interesting to note, though, that Polycarp, in producing the Philoxenian version, interpreted *sunalizomenos* as though it had a long *a*.

⁹ This term was used by Ephrem elsewhere with the same meaning; Robert Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1879-1901) 2:2133 cites “Ov.300.19”.

¹⁰ Metzger, 279.

¹¹ Charles C. Torrey, *The Composition and Date of Acts* (Cambridge, Mass., 1916) 23. Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1967) 141. Max Wilcox, *Semitisms in Acts* (Oxford, 1965) 106-9.

Viewing the situation of Acts 1:4 from this perspective is quite helpful. Among the Semites, the covenant of salt was practiced and apparently well known. Num 18:19 and 2 Chr 13:5 are two early references to this practice.

Num 18:19

All the heave offerings of the holy things,
which the children of Israel offer unto the
Lord, have I given thee, and thy sons and thy
daughter with thee, by a statute for ever:
it is a covenant of salt for ever before the
Lord unto thee and to thy seed with thee.

2 Chr 13:5

Ought ye not to know that the Lord God of
Israel gave the kingdom over Israel to David
for ever, *even* to him and to his sons by a
covenant of salt?

Another Biblical reference to this practice is in Ezra 4:14 where the text reads: *melaḥ heykla' melaḥna*, "the salt of the palace we have eaten". In the context here in Ezra 4:14, this consumption of salt produced a binding relationship of mutual trust and support between the partaking parties, here Artaxerxes and some of his top advisors. Since salt was most frequently consumed during a meal, "to be salted" in Syriac came to mean, "to eat with"¹². The connection between salt and eating and friendship is even clearer when one considers the meanings of *malaḥa*, "saltiness", in Arabic. This word can also mean "gracefulness, elegance, kindness, kindliness, friendliness and amiability"¹³. Even in modern times, the Arabs have regarded the partaking of salt by different persons as a most solemn covenant and pledge of friendship¹⁴. This illustrates why oriental hosts did not always eat with their guests for fear of becoming entangled in an unwanted relationship. Thomson mentions the significance of bread and salt among the Bedouin¹⁵, reminding us of Haenchen's reference to the pseudo-Clementines, which probably were written in Syria¹⁶ where the author very well could have been familiar with such Near Eastern practices.

Since the Old Syriac version has presented this unusual word rather than using some other word for "eat", as do the other early versions, including the Peshitta, possibly the early Syrian translators were more familiar with this feature of oriental culture and endeavored to preserve the flavor of the original

12 Jessie Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford, 1903) 276.

13 Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Ithaca, New York, 1976) 920.

14 James H. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, reprint (Plainfield, NJ, 1972) p. 80, cf. p. 34.

15 W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, reprint (Grand Rapids, 1954) 380.

16 Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 3 vols. (Utrecht, 1966-75) 1:62.

text. Later, since the topic of a covenant of salt is not mentioned among the later Syriac writers, Thomas of Harkel, motivated to literally render the Greek as closely as possible, chose the wording of the *Vetus Syra* on a more linguistic than cultural basis.

In light of the above comments on this common feature of oriental culture, the choice of *sunalizomenos* by Luke takes on a much greater significance. Jesus did not simply eat a common meal with the apostles; this meal was one of great solemnity. This last meal was, for the apostles, a time of renewed commitment to their Master. For Jesus, it was a fitting final confirmation of His love to His chosen apostles before He ascended.